



Putting a good face on it

Shelley Adler's paintings are anything but skin deep

For 25 years, Edmonton-born, Toronto-based artist Shelley Adler has been devoting herself to one of the world's most perennially compelling sights: the human face. It's a common topic, but one that Adler has treated with uncommon talent, filling large canvases with eye-popping palettes. Now, while an exhibition of her latest paintings is on in Toronto, Adler talks with Leah Sandals about portraiture, personality and her early practice as a courtroom illustrator.

Q Your paintings usually focus on people's faces. Why?

A Part of what draws me to the face is the personality and the psyche and the person inside. It's a real challenge to get something that feels like it's living and real while using materials in a sparing way. I also find that people respond to faces — whether they want [to buy paintings of] them or not, they respond. When I look at the subject matter in art, people are drawn to people.

Q So who are the people in your paintings?

A The thing about a portrait is that's really the first question: Who are they? Everybody should ask that question. And part of why I love doing faces is because it always forces me to ask that question back to myself, like, "Who am I? Who is this? Who am I seeing close up? What is this intimacy that we're sharing?" There are a lot of things surrounding a face on the wall. But more practically speaking, the people around me have been my main subjects; several paintings in this show are of friends. There is also one series that I'm working on based on the photographs of Los Angeles artist Mike Piscitelli. That's because, sometimes, it's freeing to work on the faces of people I don't know — then I'm not beholden to them.

Q What's the difference between a portrait and a painting, in your view?

A Well, a portrait is a rendition of a person's face. And a painting is about light, colour, texture, scale: all the abstract or formal qualities. When I look at a painting, I actually see the abstract qualities of it first. I don't even see what it is — what the subject matter is. When I walk through museums with people, they will say, "Oh, look what this artist has painted!" and I will say, "What? What? What have they painted? Look at how it's done!" And in my work, I try to find the middle ground between portraiture and painting.

Q With the growth over the past 10 years of sites such as Flickr and Facebook, it seems like there are a lot more images of faces floating around in the world. What do you think of that?

A I don't actually think about it that much, to be perfectly honest. There are faces everywhere. Look at billboards, movies, ads in the newspaper — every time you turn around, the face is advertising something. I guess with Facebook, you have to find the image of yourself now, right? But that self-conscious image is not the kind of image that I'm interested in. I'm interested in faces that don't have any of that self-consciousness. That's why I use friends and family a lot, because they seem to not filter themselves for me.

Q So what happens when a friend or family member sits for you, looks at the finished painting, and says, "Um, that's not what I was thinking?"

A That's fine. It's perfectly fine. It's more often the case that that's the response because people have a very hard time looking at themselves. They mostly don't like looking at themselves unless it's a flattering photograph. But what I'm looking for, in a way, is a sense of presence. That's what charges the painting with power.

Q For a brief time in the 1990s, you were a courtroom illustrator. What did you learn about faces from that experience?

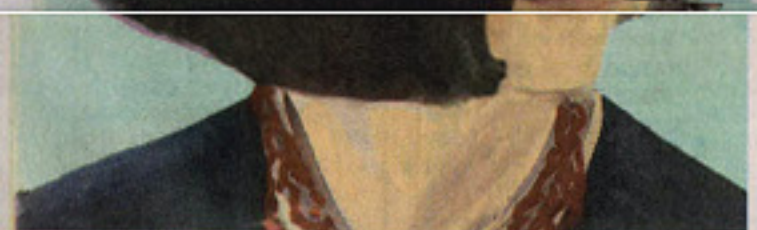
A Oh, that was just great practice. The interesting thing when you do a ton of faces, which I have done, is you start to see that, "Oh, those eyes are like so-and-so's, and that nose is like so-and-so's." Because how many variations can there possibly be? We all have two eyes, a nose and a mouth. Some people have the same mouths; some people have the same noses. So all I would do all day is be looking at people's faces thinking, "Oh my God, they're just like..."

■ Shelley Adler's exhibition at Nicholas Metivier Gallery in Toronto continues until Feb. 25. For more information, visit metiviergallery.com.

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Artist Shelley Adler has devoted her career to the human face.

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